

Challenges Faced by Guidance Counsellors and Non-Governmental Organisations in Supporting Domestic Workers in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Domestic work is essential to daily life, yet domestic workers remain marginalized and largely invisible. Because their work is performed within private households, they often lack opportunities to report exploitation, poor working conditions, and other vulnerabilities. Consequently, support structures, including those provided by guidance counsellors and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), have received limited scholarly and policy attention. This study is an attempt to unearth, examine the challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in supporting domestic workers in Nigeria. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study, which adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised all guidance counsellors and NGO personnel engaged in child and domestic worker welfare interventions within the study area. A census sampling technique was used, yielding a total of 70 respondents. Data were collected using a structured four-point Likert-scale instrument titled "Challenges in Supporting Domestic Workers Questionnaire (CSDWQ)". The instrument was validated by three experts in Guidance and Counselling and Social Work, and had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.85. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation with a criterion mean of 2.50 for decision-making. The null hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that access-related barriers, such as employer resistance and fear of victimization, significantly hinder counsellors' and NGOs' contact with domestic workers. Institutional constraints, including inadequate funding, weak legal frameworks, and lack of specialized training, also limit the effectiveness of support services. There was no significant difference between the perceptions of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel regarding these challenges. The study recommends stronger legal protection for domestic workers, specialized training for counsellors, and improved inter-agency collaboration to enhance support for domestic workers in Nigeria.

Keywords: Domestic work, Domestic workers, Guidance Counsellors, NGOs, Challenges, Nigeria, Child labour, Psychosocial support.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient and pre-colonial societies, the household served as the main unit of production. In ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, China, and pre-colonial African societies, domestic work was performed mainly by women, children, slaves, and servants within extended families (Amadiume, 1987; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). Status depended on class. In wealthy households, domestic work was carried out by slaves or servants, while in farming communities all family members contributed. In many African societies including Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, domestic work was organized around age grades, wives, and the extended family. Girls were trained early in cooking, childcare, and home management (Nwokocha, 2007; Oyewumi, 1997).

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, domestic work was shaped by slavery, colonialism, and servitude. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, millions of Africans were forced into domestic work in Europe and the Americas as cooks, nannies, and cleaners (Rodney, 1972). In the colonial era in Africa and Asia, domestic workers were employed by colonial masters, and the terms house boys and house girls became common in Nigeria, Kenya, and India (White, 1990). During the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States, middle class homes hired live in servants, mostly young women from rural areas. Domestic work became a paid occupation but continued to carry very low status (Davidoff, 1973). In the 20th century, migration and professionalization changed the nature of domestic work. After World War II, as more women entered formal employment, the demand for paid domestic workers increased (Parrenas, 2001). From the 1960s onward, global care chains emerged as women from the Philippines, Indonesia, West Africa, and Latin America migrated to work as domestic workers in wealthier countries and cities (Hochschild, 2000). In Nigeria, domestic work expanded with urbanization. House helps from rural areas were sent to live with relatives or employers in cities such as Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Abuja (Adepoju, 2005; Oloko, 1999). In the 21st century, domestic work gained international recognition. The International Labour Organization Convention 189 of 2011 recognized domestic work as decent work and set standards for fair wages, rest, and protection (ILO, 2011). However, the sector remains largely informal and is characterized by low pay, lack of contracts, abuse, and invisibility. The majority of domestic workers globally are women and girls (ILO, 2016). The nature of the work has also changed to include professional nannies, cleaners, caregivers, and agencies, while technology platforms are increasingly entering the space. Throughout history, several key themes have remained constant. Domestic work has always been gendered and performed mostly by women and girls. It has also been class based, with those of higher status employing those of lower status. Despite being essential for society to function, it has often been invisible and undervalued, and is frequently unpaid or poorly paid (Folbre, 2016). In recent times it has become migration driven, serving as a major source of employment and remittances for many countries. In the Nigerian context, domestic work has its roots in the extended family system where nieces, cousins, or younger relatives lived with and assisted older relatives (Nwokocha, 2007). With urbanization, this arrangement shifted to paid "house help" arrangements. Today, domestic work remains one of the largest informal employment sectors in Nigeria, especially for young women migrating from rural areas to urban centers like Port Harcourt (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022). Domestic work remains one of the most widespread yet least regulated forms of employment in Nigeria, involving a substantial number of adults and children, particularly girls, in private households across urban centres (Okoye and Adeyemi, 2022). Many domestic workers come from rural communities or economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are therefore particularly vulnerable to exploitation, excessive working hours, physical and emotional abuse, and denial of educational opportunities. Domestic workers in Nigeria face several dangers that are rarely reported or discussed. One of them is psychological and emotional harm. Many house helps are not allowed to use their real names and are instead called girl or house girl. This leads to identity erasure. They are also isolated from friends and family, and are told that no one else will accept them. This creates fear, dependence, and long term emotional damage. Years of constant scolding for minor mistakes also make them unable to make decisions even after leaving service. There are serious health dangers as well. Domestic workers are exposed daily to strong chemicals like bleach and insecticides without protective gloves or masks. This causes skin problems, breathing issues and long term organ damage. Many sleep on the floor in kitchens or parlours and are woken up as early as 4am, leading to chronic sleep deprivation and fatigue. Young girls often lack access to proper menstrual hygiene products and medical care. Some also face unreported sexual abuse and are unable to seek treatment due to stigma and fear. Educationally, many domestic workers suffer sabotage. They are promised schooling but end up attending only evening classes or not going to school at all. Some miss WAEC and NECO registration. This is a major concern for school guidance counsellors in Anambra State who encounter students balancing domestic duties with school work (Ncheke et al., 2018). Others spend years doing only housework and so leave service without any real skill or training. They also face digital exclusion because they are not allowed phones or access to information, so they remain unaware of their rights and available support. Socially and legally, they face debt bondage where parents collect money from employers in advance, and the child must work for years to pay it off. Many have no birth certificate or records, so if they run away they are treated as delinquents instead of victims. NGOs in Anambra have noted that government support and cooperation is often lacking when trying to intervene in such cases (Ujumadu, 2024). Some employers also damage their reputation by labeling them as thieves in order to prevent other families from helping them. In some cases they are made to swear oaths to discourage them from leaving, which causes deep fear and trauma. Economically, wage theft is common. Salaries are often kept by

employers until the end of service but the worker is sent away with little or nothing. Domestic workers have no health insurance, pension, or compensation for injuries, which contradicts provisions of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011). Because of poverty and lack of education, many former domestic workers later send their own daughters into the same situation, continuing the cycle. These dangers are less reported because they happen inside private homes where there are no witnesses. They are also seen as normal in many communities. Guidance counsellors and NGOs only discover most of these issues during counseling sessions in schools. In Anambra State, a pilot training programme convened 66 guidance counsellors drawn from the six education zones to address the socio-emotional needs of children in schools, including children engaged in domestic work (Ujumadu, 2024). The six education zones and their respective number of schools include Nnewi Zone with 49 schools (Onwuka, 2024). However, documentation and follow-up remain weak. Counsellors also report difficulty identifying students with emotional and psychological challenges due to lack of resources (Asike, 2024). Domestic workers can also pose several dangers to employers in Nigeria, and this is one reason many families are cautious about hiring. One major concern is security and property risk. Cases of theft and gradual pilfering of foodstuff, money, phones, and jewelry do occur, and because most arrangements are informal with no contract or guarantor, it becomes difficult to recover losses. Some employers also fear that workers could collude with outsiders to gain access to the house, and untrained workers may mishandle electronics, generators, or cooking gas, which can lead to property damage or fire hazards. There are also reputational and legal risks. With increased attention from NGOs and the media, any misunderstanding can lead to accusations of maltreatment, and employers fear being labeled as abusive even when they are not (Ujumadu, 2024). If a worker is injured at home or is a minor, the employer can face investigation by the police, NAPTIP, or the Ministry of Women Affairs under the Child Rights Act. Runaway cases are another problem, because employers may be accused of trafficking and have to prove they did not abduct the child, which is stressful and costly. Health and safety risks exist as well. Without health screening, workers may bring communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, skin infections, or other illnesses into the household, especially when they are involved in childcare. Poor hygiene during cooking can also lead to food poisoning for the entire family. In some Igbo communities, there are additional spiritual concerns where employers worry about workers who may have been made to swear oaths elsewhere. Productivity and emotional risks are common too. Untrained workers often require constant supervision, work slowly, or break things, which adds stress instead of reducing the employer's workload. Conflicts can arise when workers bring personal problems into the home, or when there is jealousy and quarrels with the employer's children. Some workers may also use emotional manipulation, such as threats to leave or playing the victim, to get money or favours. In many Nigerian households, especially in the South-East including Anambra, Nnewi and Onitsha, spiritual concerns are a real part of how employers and communities think about domestic workers. It is important to separate actual harm from fear and stigma, because both affect how counsellors and NGOs intervene. For some employers, the main spiritual risk is the fear of imported problems. There is a belief that a worker coming from another town or village may have been initiated into cults, or may have had oaths and swears done on them before service. Such beliefs hold that these things can follow the worker into the home and bring misfortune, sickness, or business failure. When items go missing and cannot be explained, some families attribute it to spiritual manipulation rather than ordinary theft, and this increases suspicion and reduces trust. Another practice is the use of oaths of secrecy. To prevent workers from running away or reporting abuse, some employers or recruitment agents make them swear oaths. For the worker, this creates deep fear and trauma. For the employer, there is also fear that breaking the oath could bring spiritual consequences to the house (Ibeh, 2021). Domestic workers themselves face risks linked to spiritual accusations. Young girls are sometimes accused of being responsible for a child's sickness, a business collapse, or repeated bad luck in the home. Once labeled, the worker may face verbal abuse, beating, isolation, and denial of food or medical care. In response to suspicion, some employers take workers to prayer houses or pastors for deliverance. These sessions can involve prolonged fasting, beatings, or public humiliation, which counsellors report as a form of psychological and physical abuse (Ncheke et al., 2018). Fear of being called a witch also leads to silence and non-disclosure. Workers hide injuries, illness, or abuse, and they avoid NGOs and counsellors because they fear being exposed or rejected by both the employer and the community. These dynamics create specific challenges for counsellors and NGOs. Because belief in spiritual causation has cultural legitimacy in many communities, dismissing it outright makes professionals seem like outsiders. As a result, NGOs often have to engage traditional rulers, pastors, and community leaders to mediate before any intervention can proceed. Documentation is also difficult. Cases linked to witchcraft are rarely reported to the police or NAPTIP because families prefer to handle them spiritually. This

limits data collection and makes referral and follow-up hard for support services (Umeh and Bassey, 2023). In addition, the worker experiences dual vulnerability. They are exposed to exploitation in the household and to stigma in the community. Even after rescue, reintegration is difficult if the community continues to view the child as spiritually dangerous. To address this, guidance counsellors and NGOs in Anambra are beginning to adopt multi-layered responses. Psycho-education is used to teach employers and parents the difference between real safeguarding issues and superstition, and to explain the legal implications of child abuse under the Child Rights Act. There is also increased collaboration with faith leaders, where counsellors and NGOs work with pastors and traditional leaders to discourage harmful deliverance practices and to promote referral to medical and welfare services instead. Psychosocial support is provided to help workers process trauma from accusations and oaths, and to rebuild self-esteem and trust (Ujumadu, 2024). Together, these approaches recognize that effective intervention must engage both the material conditions of domestic work and the cultural meanings attached to it. Many of these risks persist because recruitment is informal and usually done through relatives or neighbours without background checks, training, or written agreements (Ncheke et al., 2018). There is also no government database of domestic workers in Nigeria, so both employers and workers remain vulnerable (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2011). The fact that many domestic workers are minors further complicates matters, because legally the employer bears full responsibility. This explains why many families in Anambra State are reluctant to employ domestic workers or to release them for training. NGOs such as LCCO and INDOMI Foundation that have trained guidance counsellors across the six education zones in Anambra (Ujumadu, 2024) now try to address both sides by protecting the rights of workers while also educating employers on safe hiring practices. Because domestic work is largely performed within private households, these conditions often occur beyond the effective reach of formal labour protections and social welfare services (Ibeh, 2021). Domestic work generally refers to work performed within or for a household, including activities such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, washing, and running errands, by individuals who are not members of the employing household (International Labour Organization, as cited in Ibeh, 2021). When such work involves children, especially under exploitative or hazardous conditions, it may constitute child labour. The vulnerability associated with domestic work highlights the importance of appropriate support services aimed at protecting the welfare and rights of affected workers. Because domestic work happens inside private homes, workers are often cut off from family, peers, and any form of supervision. This isolation, combined with long working hours, lack of contracts, and in many cases underage recruitment, leaves them exposed to abuse, exploitation, and health risks with no one to report to (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011). Without intervention, these experiences can lead to long-term emotional trauma, poor health outcomes, educational disruption, and economic dependence. This is where structured support services become critical. Guidance and counselling support in this context goes beyond just "talking to the worker." It provides a safe space for domestic workers to process their experiences and rebuild self-worth. Psychosocial counselling helps them deal with fear, anxiety, depression, and identity issues that result from name-calling, isolation, or verbal abuse. For young domestic workers in school, counsellors in zones like Nnewi, Awka, and Onitsha in Anambra State are often the first professionals to notice signs of distress and fatigue (Ncheke et al., 2018). Advocacy is another key role. Counsellors and NGOs act as a voice for workers who cannot speak for themselves. This includes educating employers on fair treatment, minimum standards of care, and the legal implications of child labour. It also involves sensitizing communities to stop normalizing harmful practices like debt bondage and "keeping" salaries until the end of service. When abuse or health issues are identified, referral to welfare and protection services becomes necessary. Counsellors link victims to clinics for medical care, to legal aid for rights enforcement, and to government agencies such as the Ministry of Women Affairs or NAPTIP for protection. In Anambra, recent training of 66 guidance counsellors across the six education zones was partly aimed at improving this referral chain so that cases are not ignored in schools (Ujumadu, 2024). Collaboration in rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts is required in severe cases. Rescue may involve working with NGOs, community leaders, and security agencies to safely remove a worker from an abusive home. Rehabilitation focuses on restoring health, providing literacy or vocational skills, and offering trauma therapy. Reintegration ensures the worker, especially minors, can return to school or to their family with proper follow-up, so they are not sent back into domestic service. Without this coordinated approach, many victims cycle back into vulnerable situations. In essence, because the risks of domestic work are both hidden and complex, piecemeal responses are not enough. A combination of psychosocial counselling, advocacy, referral, and collaborative rescue/rehabilitation efforts is needed to protect the welfare and rights of domestic workers and to break the cycle of vulnerability. The responsibility for providing such support increasingly involves guidance counsellors and non-governmental

organisations (NGOs), particularly in cases involving child domestic workers and domestic servitude. These professionals and organisations may assist by identifying vulnerable workers, providing psychosocial support, advocating for their rights, facilitating access to welfare services, and supporting rehabilitation and reintegration into formal education or safer living and working environments. However, their ability to provide effective assistance is often constrained by the unique characteristics of domestic employment. Unlike workers in formal institutions where welfare personnel can more easily gain access, domestic workers are situated within private households, making their conditions less visible and limiting opportunities for external monitoring and intervention (Umeh and Bassey, 2023). The difficulties associated with reaching domestic workers can be better understood through the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory explains that individual wellbeing is not shaped by one factor alone, but by the interactions among different layers of the environment that surround a person. For domestic workers in Nigeria, these layers help to explain why they are so hard for guidance counsellors and NGOs to reach and support. At the core is the microsystem, which refers to the immediate settings where the individual has direct contact. For domestic workers, the household is the main microsystem. It is where they eat, sleep, work, and interact daily (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The problem is that this microsystem is often highly controlled and closed. Workers may be denied use of phones, restricted from leaving the house, and isolated from friends, relatives, and even neighbours. In many homes in places like Nnewi and Onitsha, the employer decides what the worker wears, what they eat, and whether they can attend school. When the household becomes this kind of isolated environment, it becomes nearly impossible for school counsellors or NGO staff to identify signs of abuse, exploitation, or psychological distress because there are no external observers (Ncheke et al., 2018). Moving outward, the mesosystem involves the connections between two or more microsystems, such as the relationship between the home and the school or community. For many domestic workers, especially minors, this connection is weak or completely broken. A child who should be linking home and school often misses classes, attends only evening lessons, or drops out entirely. Without this bridge, teachers and counsellors have no opportunity to screen, counsel, or refer the child for help. Recent training of 66 guidance counsellors across Anambra's six education zones was aimed at strengthening this mesosystem link so schools can flag at-risk children (Ujumadu, 2024). At the exosystem level, we find structures that the worker does not directly interact with, but which still affect them. This is where many of the biggest barriers exist for NGOs and counsellors. In Nigeria, inadequate labour regulation means domestic work is largely informal and excluded from most worker protections (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2011). Institutional support is limited, referral mechanisms are weak, and coordination between government agencies and NGOs is often poor. As a result, even when a case is identified in a school or community, follow-up, rescue, and rehabilitation become difficult to implement. The Ecological Systems Theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding that the vulnerability of domestic workers is not just an individual problem. It is tied to a closed household environment, broken links between home and school, and weak institutional structures. This suggests that effective intervention must also be multi-layered, involving counselling within schools, community engagement by NGOs, and stronger policies and collaboration at the government level. There is limited institutional support because government agencies like the Ministry of Women Affairs are understaffed and underfunded. Referral mechanisms are also weak: a counsellor who identifies an abused worker in school may not know which NGO or government office to send the case to, or may face delays and bureaucracy. Poor coordination between government agencies, NGOs, and community leaders further restricts intervention. As a result, even when a case is identified, follow-up and rescue become difficult (Ujumadu, 2024). The macrosystem and chronosystem add further context. The macrosystem includes cultural beliefs and societal attitudes. In many Nigerian communities, domestic work by young girls is normalized as help or training, so abuse is not seen as a problem that needs reporting. The chronosystem captures changes over time, such as rising poverty, migration, and increased NGO advocacy, which have made the situation both more visible and more complex. Therefore, the Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding that the vulnerability of domestic workers is not just an individual problem. It is connected to a closed household, broken school-home links, weak institutions, and broader societal norms. This explains why interventions must also be multi-layered: counsellors must work inside schools, NGOs must engage households and communities, and government must strengthen laws, referral systems, and coordination. Without addressing all these systems, efforts to protect domestic workers will continue to fall short. Evidence from previous studies further demonstrates the complexity of these challenges. Okoye and Adeyemi (2022) found that the private and largely unregulated nature of domestic employment created substantial barriers to external welfare intervention. Because domestic work takes place inside private homes rather than in formal workplaces, it is shielded from public view and from routine inspection

by labour officers, NGOs, or school authorities. There are no attendance registers, no employment contracts, and no reporting requirements. This invisibility means that abuse, underpayment, and denial of education can continue for years without detection. In communities across Anambra and other southern states, recruitment is often done informally through relatives and neighbors, which further removes the arrangement from any institutional oversight (Ncheke et al., 2018). As a result, counsellors and NGOs have no legal or practical entry point into the household unless a crisis occurs. Similarly, Ibeh (2021) reported that fear of retaliation from employers discouraged domestic workers from disclosing abuse or seeking assistance from external actors, including NGO personnel. Many workers, especially minors, are told that if they speak out they will be beaten, dismissed without pay, labeled as thieves, or sent back to the village in disgrace. Some are threatened with spiritual oaths to prevent them from running away. This creates a culture of silence. Even when school counsellors notice signs of fatigue, poor hygiene, or emotional withdrawal, the student may deny that anything is wrong out of fear of losing the job or bringing trouble to their family. The power imbalance in the employer-worker relationship therefore becomes a direct barrier to identification and help-seeking. These access-related barriers are compounded by institutional constraints. Umeh and Bassey (2023), in their study of NGO intervention programmes in southern Nigeria, identified inadequate funding and weak inter-agency coordination as major institutional challenges limiting the scale and sustainability of programmes designed to support domestic workers. Most NGOs depend on donor grants that are short-term and project-based, which makes it difficult to run continuous rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration services. At the same time, there is poor coordination between NGOs, the Ministry of Women Affairs, NAPTIP, the police, and schools. A counsellor who identifies a case in school may not know which agency to refer to, or may experience delays that cause the case to be dropped. In Anambra State, recent efforts to train 66 guidance counsellors across the six education zones were partly aimed at addressing this gap by building a stronger referral network (Ujumadu, 2024). However, without sustained funding and clear protocols, such initiatives remain limited. Taken together, the existing evidence suggests that the difficulties faced in supporting domestic workers are multidimensional, involving barriers at the household, individual, institutional, and systemic levels. At the household level, isolation and employer control block access. At the individual level, fear and lack of awareness prevent disclosure. At the institutional level, NGOs and counsellors face funding gaps and weak referral systems. At the systemic level, the lack of enforceable labour laws and the informal nature of the sector leave the entire workforce unprotected (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2011). As noted by Mrs. Nonye Soludo, Anambra First Lady, in the 2026 August Meeting, there is a rising case of abuse, neglect and maltreatment of domestic workers and maids in the state. She called for women to address it as a social and moral challenge. Several NGOs and foundations are operating in the Nnewi Education Zone of Anambra State, which covers Nnewi North, Nnewi South, and Ekwusigo LGAs. The Kingsley Obiukwu Foundation runs a Free Adult Education project in Mathematics and English for individuals aged 25 and above, and a food security project targeting 30,000 individuals across Nnewi's three LGAs over three years. The pilot began in Nnewi South LGA. The Nkeobi Care Foundation was launched in Nnewi North LGA and focuses on empowering women, protecting children, fighting poverty, and skills acquisition. Its activities include paying tuition fees for 30 pupils in Nnewi, Nnokwa, and Ojoto, empowering two women to start small businesses, offsetting hospital bills including for a cancer patient, and distributing food to underprivileged families. Life Care Coalition Outreach, LCCO, and the INDOMI Foundation - Igwe Davidson Okafor and Mercy Ikeanyi Foundation jointly trained 66 guidance counsellors across the six education zones in Anambra, including Nnewi. Their focus is on the socio-emotional state of children in schools and education support, with plans to replicate the training in all secondary schools in the zone. The OCI Foundation works on health education through its "Arm Our Youths (ArOY) Health Campaign on breast and cervical cancer. It runs the "Anambra ArOY Health Campaign Schools Challenge" in secondary schools within Nnewi Zone. The IYCON Foundation in partnership with ADON Vocational and Technical Academy focuses on youth skills acquisition and provides a ₦1 million grant for outstanding participants. Training areas include electrical/electronics, automobile, building technology, catering, ICT, fashion, agriculture, and shoe/bag making. The programme is coordinated with the Nnewi Youth Forum. The BINA Foundation is based in Nnewi and focuses on the empowerment of Persons Living with Disabilities. It provides free skill training in computer literacy for the blind, catering, shoe and bag making, bead making, fashion design, and soap and cosmetology. The Walata Humanitarian Foundation works in education, healthcare, and community development. In Nnewi South Constituency I, it donated learning materials and paid FSLCE fees for 62 children from 31 government primary schools. The Light Givers Foundation, LGF, provides scholarships to financially disadvantaged students. It works with the Post Primary Schools Service Commission

in Nnewi Zone to support access to secondary and university education. Other initiatives linked to Nnewi Zone include the Nnewi Digital Community, which is partnering with Iykon Foundation to add digital marketing training to youth empowerment programmes. The Zonal Intervention Project and Technology Incubation Center in Nnewi has also trained 250 youths in ICT, leather works, food processing, and digital marketing. There have been reported cases of deaths involving domestic workers and househelps in Anambra State. While none of the publicly documented cases specifically state "Nnewi Education Zone," some occurred in LGAs close to Nnewi Zone.

Domestic work is work, and every worker deserves dignity, fair pay, safe housing, and the right to report abuse without fear. Violence against domestic workers is a crime, not a family matter. Abuse thrives in silence, and economic desperation increases vulnerability. Internal migration for domestic work is prevalent among young females in the study area, with Nnewi, Awka, and Onitsha as key destinations. The motivation is often to support family livelihoods or cover educational expenses. While not all violent incidents in the zone are directly linked to domestic work, they show how vulnerable young workers can be when protection is absent. According to the South Saharan Social Development Organization (SSDO), the South-East has the highest child labour rate in the country at 49.9%, with many of these children, predominantly young girls, suffering physical and sexual abuse. Most violations go unreported due to power imbalances and fear of reprisal. At the state level, the Anambra First Lady has also raised concerns over rising cases of abuse, neglect, and maltreatment of domestic workers and maids, describing it as a social and moral challenge that requires urgent action. This has strengthened calls for written contracts, rest days, medical care, and clear reporting channels for domestic workers. Every worker has the right to dignity and safety, which means no beating, insult, starvation, or confinement. Workers deserve a fair agreement with clear terms on salary, work hours, rest days, and welfare before work begins. Most importantly, they have the right to report. Abuse is a crime and no one should suffer in silence. Employers are therefore advised to have a written agreement, pay on time, respect rest days, allow phone access and healthcare, and treat domestic workers with dignity and fairness. Community leaders and landlords should not ignore signs. Bruises, fear, or a child who is always isolated may be red flags, and we should create safe reporting points in markets and town halls. While media coverage of domestic work often focuses on exploitation and abuse, it is equally important to acknowledge documented cases of positive employer-worker relationships that uphold dignity, fairness, and mutual respect. These narratives demonstrate that when domestic work is approached with mutual respect, it can yield outcomes of loyalty, personal development, and social mobility for both the worker and the household. In several communities across Nigeria, including Nnewi, Awka, and Onitsha, there are accounts of domestic workers who were integrated into the family structure and supported to attain educational and professional advancement. It is not uncommon for employers to sponsor a househelp through secondary and tertiary education. As a result, some former domestic workers have become teachers, nurses, and entrepreneurs, and now employ others themselves. In these cases, the relationship evolves beyond employment to one of kinship, where the individual is included in family ceremonies such as weddings and burials. Such outcomes are typically preceded by consistent practices of fair remuneration, respect for personhood, and investment in education. There is also evidence of acts of loyalty and protective behaviour by domestic workers. A widely reported incident in 2021 involved a nanny in Lagos who risked her life to evacuate children from a burning residence. Beyond isolated events, the daily contributions of domestic workers to household maintenance, child care, and elder care constitute a significant form of labour that sustains family life. When such contributions are met with dignity, they often engender long-term commitment and trust. Furthermore, some employers have demonstrated commitment to worker welfare that extends beyond statutory obligations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous households in Anambra and other states continued wage payments despite reduced work schedules, and provided support for healthcare and food security. Other employers have facilitated vocational training in areas such as tailoring, catering, and hairdressing, thereby enabling workers to transition to self-employment after their period of service. These practices illustrate how investment in human capital within the domestic sphere can produce sustainable livelihoods. At the institutional level, there is growing recognition of ethical employment practices. The Anambra State Ministry of Women Affairs, in collaboration with the Office of the First Lady, has acknowledged employers who maintain model households characterized by written agreements, designated rest periods, and access to healthcare. The Ministry also provides welfare and rescue support to affected workers. Non-governmental organizations such as NAPTIP and the South Saharan Social Development Organization have implemented programmes aimed at retraining and reintegrating domestic workers, and at promoting standards that align with child protection and labour rights frameworks. The

significance of these positive accounts for Nnewi Zone lies in their demonstration effect. First, they provide empirical evidence that respectful employment relations correlate with improved worker retention and productivity. Second, they counter dominant narratives that portray domestic work exclusively through the lens of victimization, thereby reducing stigma and encouraging more families to engage in formalized arrangements. Third, by highlighting best practices, they contribute to the normalization of contracts, rest days, and health safeguards as standard components of domestic employment. Although reports of abuse warrant urgent attention and policy response, they do not represent the totality of experiences within domestic work. There exists a substantial body of quieter, but equally important, experiences of mentorship, care, and empowerment within Nigerian homes. The promotion of dignified treatment, fair agreements, and opportunities for growth is not only a matter of worker protection. It is also a strategy for strengthening family cohesion and community wellbeing in Nnewi Zone and beyond. While previous studies have highlighted issues such as employer retaliation, limited access, inadequate funding, and weak coordination, there remains a need to examine these challenges from the perspectives of the professionals directly involved in providing support. Guidance counsellors in schools are often the first to observe changes in behaviour, attendance, and academic performance among student domestic workers. NGO staff are the ones who attempt rescue, provide psychosocial support, and navigate government bureaucracy. Their lived experiences can reveal which barriers are most common, which strategies work, and where the gaps in policy and practice exist. Understanding the specific challenges encountered by guidance counsellors and NGOs is therefore important for developing intervention strategies that are accessible, coordinated, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of domestic workers. Without this professional perspective, policies risk being designed in isolation and may fail to address the realities of implementation on the ground. This study, therefore, investigated the challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in reaching and supporting domestic workers in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Domestic work in Nigeria constitutes a significant component of informal employment, with disproportionate representation of young girls and women from economically vulnerable households. Although this sector provides income and, in some instances, pathways to education and social mobility, it is concurrently associated with elevated risks of exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Media reports and institutional records routinely document cases of physical violence, confinement, wage denial, and trafficking. Data from Anambra State corroborate this pattern. The South-East region records the highest prevalence of child labour in the country, and the Anambra State Ministry of Women Affairs, alongside other agencies, has handled multiple cases of maltreatment involving domestic workers. Notwithstanding the gravity of these concerns, extant discourse is skewed toward negative outcomes. This emphasis has had the effect of obscuring documented positive experiences in which mutual respect, formalized agreements, and investment in worker welfare have produced outcomes of loyalty, educational attainment, and economic independence. Furthermore, despite the existence of institutional frameworks such as the Anambra State Ministry of Women Affairs, NAPITIP, and the National Human Rights Commission, the implementation and reach of protective interventions remain inconsistent across communities. A critical gap persists in both scholarship and policy practice regarding the perspectives of frontline professionals who directly interface with domestic workers. Guidance counsellors within the school system are often the first to observe indicators of abuse, absenteeism, and declining academic performance among student domestic workers. Non-governmental organizations are primarily responsible for rescue operations, psychosocial support, and navigating bureaucratic processes for victim assistance and referral. However, there is limited empirical evidence detailing the specific operational challenges these professionals encounter in identifying, accessing, and supporting domestic workers. Issues such as employer retaliation, structural invisibility of domestic workers outside formal institutions, weak legal enforcement, inadequate funding, limited specialized training, poor inter-agency coordination, and community silence have been alluded to in literature, yet they remain insufficiently examined from the standpoint of service providers. The consequence of this gap is that policies and intervention programmes may be formulated without sufficient grounding in implementation realities, thereby compromising their accessibility, sustainability, and effectiveness. In the absence of data on the barriers faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs, efforts to protect domestic workers in Nnewi Zone and in Nigeria more broadly risk remaining reactive rather than preventive. It is against this background that this study investigated the challenges faced by guidance counsellors and non-governmental organizations in reaching and supporting domestic workers in Nigeria, with specific focus on Nnewi education zone.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to:

1. Determine the access-related challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in reaching and supporting domestic workers.
2. Determine the institutional and systemic challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in supporting domestic workers.

Research Questions

1. What access-related challenges do guidance counsellors and NGOs face in reaching and supporting domestic workers?
2. What institutional and systemic challenges do guidance counsellors and NGOs face in supporting domestic workers?

Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on three interrelated theories: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Social Exclusion Theory, and the Child Rights-Based Approach. These theories provide a conceptual lens for understanding the access-related and institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and non-governmental organizations in supporting domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) posits that human development and social interventions occur within nested systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In relation to access-related challenges, domestic work takes place within the microsystem of private households that are not easily accessible to school counsellors and NGO staff. This invisibility limits identification, outreach, and direct counselling. At the mesosystem level, weak collaboration between schools, NGOs, town unions, and employers further restricts access to domestic workers. With respect to institutional challenges, the exosystem and macrosystem reveal how the absence of clear policies, weak enforcement of child labour laws, and cultural norms that normalize domestic work constrain institutional responses. Thus, intervention efforts by counsellors and NGOs are shaped and limited by factors beyond their immediate control. The theory therefore explains why support for domestic workers cannot be effective when interventions target only individuals without addressing household, community, and policy-level systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social Exclusion Theory (Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994) explains how certain groups are systematically denied access to economic resources, education, social services, and participation due to poverty, status, and structural inequality. Regarding access-related challenges, domestic workers, who are often from poor households, are socially excluded from mainstream educational and welfare programmes. Their employment status renders them invisible, making it difficult for guidance counsellors and NGOs to locate and engage them. In terms of institutional challenges, exclusion is reinforced by the lack of targeted policies, inadequate funding, and the non-integration of domestic workers into school and vocational systems. This perpetuates cycles of deprivation and limits the effectiveness of NGO and counselling interventions. The theory thus frames the challenges as structural rather than individual, and underscores the need for deliberate inclusion strategies (Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994). The Child Rights-Based Approach, grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Child Rights Act (2003), asserts that every child has inalienable rights to protection from exploitation, access to education, health, and participation, irrespective of socio-economic background or employment status. From the perspective of access-related challenges, the inability of guidance counsellors and NGOs to reach domestic workers represents a failure to guarantee the right to protection and education for a vulnerable group. Concerning institutional challenges, weak legal frameworks and poor implementation of the Child Rights Act constitute institutional violations of these rights. The approach therefore provides both the ethical justification and legal mandate for strengthening

counselling services and NGO interventions. It further positions the support of domestic workers not as welfare but as an obligation of the state, schools, and civil society (United Nations, 1989; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). In sum, Ecological Systems Theory explains where barriers to access and institutional support occur, Social Exclusion Theory explains why domestic workers are marginalized, and the Child Rights-Based Approach specifies what ought to be done to address these gaps. Consequently, effective support for domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone requires multi-level interventions that enhance access at household and school levels, and strengthen institutional and policy frameworks to uphold the rights and welfare of domestic workers.

Theoretical studies

Domestic work is one of the oldest forms of labour. It refers to work done in and for a household, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, laundry, elder care, and other household management tasks (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2011). Pursuant to Article 91 of the Nigerian Labour Act (1990), a ‘domestic servant’ refers to any individual engaged as a house, table, or garden worker within the domestic services of a private dwelling, and the category also encompasses drivers of privately owned or used motor vehicles. This legal definition has direct implications for both access-related and institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in supporting domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone. In terms of access-related challenges, the framing of domestic work as service within “any private dwelling house” locates workers within the microsystem of the home, a space that is largely inaccessible to school counsellors and NGO personnel. The private nature of employment limits visibility, record-keeping, and systematic outreach. Because the law treats domestic service as an informal, household-based arrangement rather than formal employment, domestic workers remain invisible in school registers, community databases, and NGO target lists, making identification and direct counselling difficult. Regarding institutional challenges, the 1990 definition excludes domestic workers from most provisions of formal labour protection and from integration into mainstream education, health, and social welfare systems. By categorizing them separately and failing to align with subsequent child rights and labour standards, the Act reinforces weak policy coherence at the exosystem and macrosystem levels. This contributes to inadequate funding, absence of targeted programmes, and poor enforcement of the Child Rights Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003). Consequently, guidance counsellors and NGOs operate without clear institutional mandates, referral pathways, or legal backing to intervene in private homes where child domestic workers are found. Thus, Article 91 illustrates how a legal categorization rooted in the private household not only restricts physical access to domestic workers but also perpetuates institutional neglect. Effective support therefore requires revisiting this definition to align it with current child rights frameworks and to enable multi-level collaboration among schools, NGOs, and regulatory agencies. According to Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed of UNICEF Innocenti, the social significance and demand for paid domestic work have expanded substantially worldwide. Global estimates indicate that domestic work provides employment for approximately 70.1 million people, with the actual figure potentially reaching 100 million given that much of this work remains hidden and unregistered. Regional disparities are evident: between 4% and 10% of workers in the Global South are engaged in domestic work, compared with 1% to 2.5% in the Global North. Within Africa, domestic work accounts for 1.4% of total employment and 4.9% of total paid employees (Nesbitt-Ahmed, n.d.). Although domestic work remains highly feminized, with women constituting 70.2% of domestic workers, emerging scholarship also addresses men’s participation, including male migrant domestic workers who perform tasks traditionally associated with women’s reproductive labour within households. The growth in domestic employment is linked to broader transformations in global labour markets, particularly the shift toward a service economy and the expansion of casual and insecure forms of work that have accompanied increased female labour force participation. This trend is further reinforced by declining public provision of care, women’s difficulties in reconciling paid employment with unpaid domestic responsibilities, and the limited redistribution of unpaid care work to men. In response to these pressures, middle- and upper-class households have increasingly relied on commoditised care work as a strategy for managing household demands (Nesbitt-Ahmed, n.d.). Domestic workers make a significant economic and social contribution, yet they continue to experience precarious working conditions and limited social protection, largely because domestic work is regarded as low-status employment. Standard employment benefits such as health insurance, maternity leave, and social pensions are rarely incorporated into working arrangements. In addition to low or non-existent wages, live-in domestic workers in particular face a blurred boundary between work and private life, characterized by extended working hours, minimal rest and leisure time, and infrequent days off. They also contend with heavy workloads, inadequate accommodation and food for live-in workers, job insecurity, and heightened exposure to violence and abuse in the workplace (International

Labour Organization, 2011; 2016). From the perspective of Social Exclusion Theory (Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994), these conditions reflect structural marginalization. The low status accorded to domestic work results in the exclusion of workers from mainstream labour protections, social security systems, and welfare programmes. This exclusion reinforces their invisibility and limits the capacity of guidance counsellors and NGOs to identify, reach, and support them, thereby perpetuating cycles of deprivation. In line with the Child Rights-Based Approach (United Nations, 1989; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003), the absence of decent working conditions and social protection constitutes a violation of children's rights to protection, health, rest, and education. When domestic work involves children, the lack of regulated hours, safe accommodation, and freedom from abuse directly contravenes provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Child Rights Act. The approach therefore provides both the ethical and legal basis for demanding that guidance counsellors and NGOs, in collaboration with state institutions, intervene to safeguard the rights and welfare of child domestic workers. Thus, the precarity of domestic work is not only an employment issue but also a manifestation of social exclusion and rights deficits. Addressing it requires multi-level action that moves beyond individual cases to reform institutional policies and ensure that domestic workers are recognized as rights-holders rather than as informal household labour. International and national regulations play a critical role in improving the protection and working conditions of domestic workers. At the global level, minimum standards for workers' rights are provided through the International Labour Organization's Decent Work for Domestic Workers Agenda, particularly the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and the accompanying Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201), which entered into force in September 2013. Convention No. 189 recognizes the social and economic value of domestic work and calls for the progressive extension of social security to domestic workers. It sets out 27 minimum standards for the protection of domestic workers' rights. Key provisions include: effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence (Article 5); fair terms of employment and decent working conditions with respect for privacy (Article 6); and regulation of normal hours of work, overtime compensation, periods of daily and weekly rest, and paid annual leave (Article 10) (International Labour Organization, 2011a). Number 201 complements the Convention by providing practical guidance for implementation. For example, Paragraph 25 emphasizes the need to take measures that enable domestic workers to reconcile work and family responsibilities (International Labour Organization, 2011b). As of 2020, Convention No. 189 has been ratified by 29 countries, with 27 ratifications already in force and two additional ratifications scheduled to enter into force between April and June 2020 (International Labour Organization, 2020). While C 189 provides a normative framework, its limited ratification and weak domestication in many countries, including Nigeria, contribute to the institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. The absence of binding national legislation aligned with C189 means domestic workers, especially children, remain outside formal labour protections, school systems, and social services, thereby restricting access and institutional support. In Nigeria, domestic work remains an integral part of everyday household life. Many households employ workers to perform a range of services including cleaning, cooking, childcare, laundry, driving, gardening, and security. Some families engage female workers primarily for household chores and childcare, while male workers are often engaged for domestic tasks as well as gardening, guarding, and, in some cases, driving. Employment arrangements vary, with some households hiring domestic workers on a full-time, live-in basis, while others rely on part-time workers (International Labour Organization, 2016). Domestic workers constitute a notable segment of Nigeria's informal labour force. According to the Nigeria Labour Force Survey Q1 2024, 4.1% of employees reported working in "Household(s), as a domestic worker. This reflects the continued significance of paid domestic work within private households, even as most employment in Nigeria remains informal. The NBS reports that 93.5% of employed Nigerians were in informal employment in Q4 2022, and that wage employment was scarce at 13.4% in Q4 2022 and 11.8% in Q1 2023, with most Nigerians engaged in self-employment or agriculture. Comparatively, the last published headcount from the 2007 National Bureau of Statistics estimated 197,900 domestic workers, comprising 98,300 women and 99,600 men. However, these figures are widely considered underestimates due to the hidden and unregistered nature of domestic work within private dwellings. Recent NBS data also highlight the gendered nature of domestic and care work more broadly. The Nigeria Time Use Survey 2024 found that women spend about five hours per day on unpaid domestic and care work, compared to one hour for men. Women devote 15.1% of their day to unpaid domestic work and 5.9% to unpaid care work, compared to 2.9% and 1.2% for men respectively. This reinforces the feminization of domestic labour and the reliance on paid domestic workers, particularly women, to ease household burdens. The informal, household-based, and gendered character of domestic work in Nigeria directly contributes to access-related and institutional challenges. Because

employment occurs within private homes and is largely unregistered, guidance counsellors and NGOs face difficulties in identifying, reaching, and providing support to domestic workers, especially children. The dominance of informal employment and low wage employment also means domestic workers remain excluded from formal labour protections, school systems, and social security, limiting institutional response. Nigerian legislation and policy partially give effect to some of the standards contained in ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. Several policies recognize paid domestic work, including the Labour Regulations (1936), the Labour Act (1990), the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2003), the Employee Compensation Act (2010), and the National Labour Migration Policy (2013) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990; 2003; 2010; 2013). However, the legal recognition of domestic work remains problematic. For example, Article 91 of the Nigerian Labour Act (1990) defines a ‘domestic servant’ as: any house, table or garden servant employed in or in connection with the domestic services of any private dwelling house, and includes a servant employed as the driver of a privately owned or privately used motor car (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990). The continued use of the term ‘servant’ denotes a hierarchical and inferior status between the employer and the worker, which undermines the dignity of work recognized under C189. A closer examination of existing policies reveals significant gaps, exclusions, and loopholes that exempt both employers and the State from ensuring protection and regulation of domestic work. One key example is the ‘implicit exclusion’ of domestic workers from the national minimum wage. The National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act (2011) defines a worker as: any member of the civil service of the Federation, of a State or Local Government or any individual (other than persons occupying executive, administrative, technical or professional positions in any such civil service) who has entered into or works under a contract with an employer whether the contract is manual labour, clerical work or otherwise, expressed or implied, oral or in writing, and whether it is a contract personally to execute any work or labour (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011, Article 9). While this definition appears broad, in practice domestic workers employed in private households are rarely covered by wage enforcement mechanisms. This was evident in the 2019 proposal by the Nigerian Senate to raise the national minimum wage from NGN18,000 (USD\$58) to NGN30,000 (USD\$97), which did not include specific provisions for the enforcement of wages for domestic workers in private homes (Premium Times, 2019). These legislative gaps contribute directly to the institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. The absence of explicit inclusion of domestic workers in wage, safety, and social protection laws means they remain outside formal labour regulation, school systems, and welfare programmes. Consequently, counsellors and NGOs lack legal backing and institutional pathways to intervene, and domestic workers continue to experience social exclusion and rights deficits contrary to the objectives of C189. Nigerian legislation and policy partially give effect to some of the standards contained in ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. Several policies recognize paid domestic work, including the Labour Regulations (1936), the Labour Act (1990), the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2003), the Employee Compensation Act (2010), and the National Labour Migration Policy (2013) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990; 2003; 2010; 2013). However, legal recognition remains weak and problematic. Article 91 of the Nigerian Labour Act (1990) defines a ‘domestic servant’ as: any house, table or garden servant employed in or in connection with the domestic services of any private dwelling house, and includes a servant employed as the driver of a privately owned or privately used motor car (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990). The use of the term ‘servant’ reinforces a hierarchical and inferior status, which contradicts the dignity and equality of work principles in C189. A closer review reveals critical gaps, exclusions, and loopholes that exempt employers and the State from ensuring protection and regulation. A key example is the implicit exclusion from the national minimum wage. The National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act (2011) defines a worker broadly to include individuals under oral or written contracts for manual, clerical, or other labour (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011, Article 9). Yet in practice, domestic workers in private households are rarely covered by wage enforcement. This gap was evident in the 2019 Senate proposal to raise the minimum wage from NGN18,000 (USD\$58) to NGN30,000 (USD\$97), with no specific mechanism for domestic workers (Premium Times, 2019).

Table 1: Coverage of Selected C189 Standards in Nigerian Legislation

C189 Provision	Relevant Nigerian Law/Policy	Level of Coverage / Gaps
Art. 5: Protection against abuse, harassment and violence	Trafficking in Persons Act (2003); Child Rights Act (2003)	Partial. Criminalizes trafficking and child abuse but lacks specific workplace protections for adult domestic workers in private homes.
Art. 6: Fair terms of employment and respect for privacy	Labour Act (1990), Art. 91	Weak. Defines 'domestic servant' but provides no standards on contracts, privacy, or decent working conditions.
Art. 10: Normal hours of work, overtime, rest periods, paid leave	Labour Act (1990)	Excluded. Hours of work provisions apply mainly to formal sector. Domestic workers in private homes are effectively excluded.
Social Security	Employee Compensation Act (2010)	Limited. Covers workplace injury but most domestic workers are informal and not registered.
Minimum Wage	National Minimum Wage Act (2011)	Implicit exclusion. Definition covers 'workers' but enforcement in private households is absent. 2019 increase to NGN30,000 did not target domestic workers (Premium Times, 2019).
Migration	National Labour Migration Policy (2013)	Partial. Addresses migrant workers generally but lacks specific protections for migrant domestic workers.

Sources: ILO, 2011; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990; 2010; 2011; 2013.

The findings in Table 1 indicate that Nigeria's legislative framework provides only partial and fragmented protection for domestic workers in relation to ILO Convention 189. This legal deficit has direct implications for the work of guidance counsellors who seek to assist this population. First, the partial protection under Article 5 means counsellors lack a clear legal basis to intervene in cases of abuse and harassment in private homes. Since adult domestic workers are not specifically covered by the Trafficking in Persons Act (2003) or Child Rights Act (2003), counsellors often encounter employer resistance and have no mandate to access households, limiting their ability to provide support or referrals. Second, the weak coverage of fair terms of employment under Article 6 and the exclusion from working hours under Article 10 create role ambiguity for counsellors. Without enforceable contracts or regulated working conditions, it becomes difficult for counsellors to advocate for decent work, mediate disputes, or even identify what constitutes exploitation. Third, limited social security coverage and implicit exclusion from minimum wage laws compound the problem. Because most domestic workers are informal and unregistered, counsellors struggle to connect them to state support systems such as the Employees' Compensation Scheme. This weakens the effectiveness of counselling interventions that aim to link clients to social protection. Finally, the partial coverage of migration policy suggests that migrant domestic workers are especially underserved. Counsellors report challenges in identifying, tracing, and assisting migrant workers due to the absence of targeted policy frameworks. Studies consistently report inadequate funding and weak institutional support as major barriers to NGO service delivery for domestic workers. Obi and Ezenwaka (2020), in their study of NGOs in Anambra State, found that organizations lacked sufficient funding, shelter facilities, and trained personnel to manage cases of rescued domestic workers. This problem is compounded by donor priorities that often overlook domestic work. Anti-Slavery International (2015) noted across West Africa that funding tends to focus on human trafficking and sexual exploitation, leaving the labour rights of domestic workers underfunded. Consequently, even when NGOs provide essential welfare and advocacy services, their impact remains limited. The ILO (2016) observed globally that NGOs cannot substitute for state enforcement

mechanisms, particularly in areas such as wages, contracts, and social security, which are critical for decent work. Beyond resource constraints, socio-cultural factors further hinder NGO interventions. UNICEF (2019) reported that in many Nigerian communities, sending children for domestic work is viewed as a form of socialization or poverty alleviation. This perception makes community sensitization and behavioural change difficult, because the practice is widely accepted rather than questioned. In addition, victims and their families often fear stigma and retaliation from employers, which discourages them from seeking NGO assistance (WARD, 2018). The operational context also poses challenges. Solidarity Center (2017), in a study conducted in South Africa, observed that because domestic workers are isolated in individual homes, NGOs find it difficult to organize them for group training, legal education, or collective bargaining. This isolation limits both outreach and empowerment efforts. The situation is even more complex for migrant domestic workers. The ILO (2013) reported that weak migration policies and fear of immigration enforcement prevent NGOs from assisting undocumented migrant domestic workers. In Nigeria, the National Labour Migration Policy (2013) addresses migrant workers generally but lacks specific provisions for domestic workers. As a result, NGOs operate without a clear legal or policy framework for intervention in cases involving migrant domestic workers (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that NGOs assisting domestic workers in Nigeria face four recurring challenges: restricted access due to the private nature of work, legal exclusion from labour protections, inadequate funding and institutional support, and socio-cultural barriers that normalize exploitation. While these studies provide useful insights, most focus on trafficking or child labour broadly, with limited attention to the specific operational challenges NGOs encounter in assisting both adult and child domestic workers at the state level. There is a particular dearth of empirical data from Anambra State. These legislative gaps directly explain the institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. Because domestic work is not fully covered by labour, wage, and social protection laws, workers remain invisible to state institutions, schools, and welfare systems. This limits counsellors' and NGOs' ability to identify, refer, and support domestic workers, and perpetuates the social exclusion highlighted in Social Exclusion Theory, as well as violations of rights under the Child Rights-Based Approach. Domestic workers in Nigeria appear to be excluded from the entitlement to the national minimum wage under Article 2(a) of the National Minimum Wage Act. The Act provides that the requirement to pay the national minimum wage shall not apply to an establishment in which less than fifty workers are employed" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011). Given that domestic work is performed almost exclusively in private households with fewer than fifty employees, this provision effectively excludes the vast majority of domestic workers from wage protection. These legal gaps are compounded by the broader Nigerian context, where cultural and societal attitudes of stigmatization and discrimination toward domestic workers persist (ILO, 2016; Oloko, 2006). Domestic work is often regarded as "unskilled" or "inferior" labour, and it remains largely invisible within formal regulatory systems. There are also no formal mechanisms in place to enforce existing labour laws within private households. As a result, many employers are either unaware of the relevant legal provisions or unwilling to comply with them. Thus, while international standard-setting such as ILO Convention No. 189 is significant for the protection of domestic workers, actual regulation and protection ultimately depend on societal recognition of domestic work as decent work (ILO, 2011). In the absence of legal coverage, enforcement structures, and social valuation, domestic workers continue to experience exclusion from wages, social security, and other basic labour rights. This exclusionary legal framework and societal devaluation directly affect the work of guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. Without statutory backing or enforcement, institutions lack clear mandates and pathways to identify, protect, and refer domestic workers. This reinforces the institutional challenges documented in this study and aligns with Social Exclusion Theory, which argues that marginalization is sustained when a group is denied access to legal, economic, and social institutions.

Nigeria's social protection agenda has expanded significantly in recent years. Key developments include the rollout of the comprehensive National Social Safety Net Programme (NASSP) under the National Social Investment Programme (N-SIP), the approval of a National Social Protection Policy, and the establishment of the National Social Safety Net Coordination Office (NASSCO) to coordinate all existing social assistance programmes in the country (Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2016; World Bank, 2020). The NASSP is designed to provide targeted cash transfers, livelihood support, and human capital investments to poor and vulnerable households. NASSCO serves as the central registry and coordinating body for identifying beneficiaries and harmonizing social assistance across federal and state levels (World Bank, 2020). Despite this expansion, domestic workers remain largely excluded from Nigeria's social protection architecture. Because

most domestic work occurs in the informal economy within private households, workers are not captured in formal employment records, contributory pension schemes, or the Employee Compensation Scheme (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010). The NASSP targeting mechanisms also rely on household and community registries that rarely identify paid domestic workers as a distinct vulnerable group. This exclusion is significant because domestic workers experience many of the risks that social protection is meant to address: income insecurity, lack of health coverage, job instability, and exposure to abuse. Without explicit inclusion, the current agenda risks reinforcing the invisibility of domestic workers despite ILO Convention No. 189's call for the progressive extension of social security to them (ILO, 2011). The limited reach of social protection to domestic workers contributes to the institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. With no formal safety net or referral pathway, counsellors and NGOs lack institutional support to address health, education, or welfare needs of domestic workers. Extending NASSP and NASSCO coverage to explicitly include domestic workers would provide a policy and administrative entry point for institutions to identify and support them. Current social protection programmes in Nigeria include the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programme, which provides NGN5,000 (USD\$16) monthly to one million extremely poor and vulnerable households, and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), which provides one meal a day to 5.5 million public primary school children (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, 2021; World Bank, 2020). In addition, there are labour market and empowerment programmes such as the N-Power Programme – a job creation and skills programme for young Nigerians aged 18–35 — and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), which provides micro-credit to traders and artisans (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, 2021). For the most part, these programmes do not explicitly include informal workers, including domestic workers. Eligibility and targeting under CCT and GEEP are often tied to community registers, poverty maps, or formal enterprise records, which rarely capture paid domestic workers employed in private households. Similarly, N-Power targets graduates and youth in specific sectors, while NHGSFP targets school children, leaving adult domestic workers outside coverage (ILO, 2016; World Bank, 2020). Given the significant role of the paid domestic work sector in Nigeria's informal economy and its contribution to household productivity and care, it is vital that social protection be extended to domestic workers and to broader categories of informal workers. Extending coverage would align Nigeria's social protection agenda with the principles of ILO Convention No. 189, which calls for the progressive extension of social security to domestic workers (ILO, 2011). The exclusion of domestic workers from CCT, GEEP, N-Power and other N-SIP components limits the capacity of guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone to link them to state support. Without inclusion in formal safety nets, domestic workers continue to rely on precarious, unregulated employment, which reinforces the access-related and institutional challenges identified in this study. Extending social protection coverage to domestic workers in Nigeria faces significant challenges. The broader social protection strategy already contends with policy inconsistency, lack of reliable data, inadequate funding and accountability, low coverage, and poor targeting (World Bank, 2020; ILO, 2016). Within this context, extending protection to domestic workers is further complicated by the structure of the sector itself. In Nigeria, coverage of social security, workers' rights, and minimum wage guarantees is largely limited to workers in the formal economy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010; 2011). Domestic workers rarely fall under this category. Because employment occurs in private households, often on a casual or oral basis, domestic workers are systematically excluded from contributory schemes such as the Employee Compensation Act and from wage enforcement mechanisms under the National Minimum Wage Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010; 2011). Domestic workers are also characterized by invisibility and isolation. Live-in arrangements, long working hours, limited time off, restricted freedom of movement, and few social networks constrain opportunities for collective bargaining to improve living and working conditions (ILO, 2016). Collective organizing of domestic workers remains at an early stage in Nigeria. In July 2011, the Federation of Informal Workers' Organisation of Nigeria (FIWON), an umbrella body for self-employed workers in the informal economy, convened a one-day workshop titled 'Building a Union to Fight for Domestic Workers' Rights and Respect at Work: Challenges and Opportunities'. Twenty domestic workers participated and called for job security and improved working conditions to enable decent livelihoods and contribution to national development (FIWON, 2011). However, awareness of rights does not easily translate into action. High turnover, fear of job loss, and power imbalances make it difficult for domestic workers to demand basic protections such as written contracts through which terms of work can be negotiated (ILO, 2011). Without legal recognition, enforcement mechanisms, and organized representation, domestic workers remain largely outside Nigeria's expanding social protection architecture. These structural and organizational barriers directly affect guidance

counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. The invisibility of domestic workers, weak data, and absence of collective platforms limit institutional access and referral pathways. Consequently, counsellors and NGOs lack the mandate, data, and partnerships needed to identify and support domestic workers, perpetuating the access-related and institutional challenges documented in this study. Low and irregular wages constitute a major barrier to domestic workers' participation in contributory social security schemes in Nigeria. Remuneration for domestic work is highly variable, ranging from no cash payment or payment in-kind, to as little as NGN1,500 (USD\$5) per month, with average reported earnings around NGN13,000 (USD\$38) per month (ILO, 2016; National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). At these income levels, most domestic workers cannot afford regular contributions to contributory social insurance schemes without those schemes being free or heavily subsidized. This challenge is compounded by administrative design. Procedures for registration and contribution to social protection schemes were traditionally developed for formal companies and public institutions (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010). As a result, employers in private households often have limited knowledge of legal requirements, or show little willingness to seek information on how to register domestic workers for social security benefits. The combination of low wages and employer-side administrative barriers therefore excludes most domestic workers from accessing health insurance, pensions, and employee compensation. The affordability and administrative gaps identified here help explain the institutional challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. Because domestic workers cannot independently pay into contributory schemes and employers are not compelled to register them, counsellors and NGOs lack institutional entry points to link workers to health, pension, or compensation benefits. This reinforces the exclusion of domestic workers from formal social protection and limits the effectiveness of referrals and support. Despite sector-specific and systemic challenges, there are clear policy entry points to expand social protection to include domestic workers in Nigeria. First, existing labour legislation could be reviewed to close coverage gaps. Article 54 of the Labour Act, which provides for maternity leave, could be revised to explicitly include domestic workers and prevent the denial of this right (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990). Similarly, Article 88(1)(d) of the Labour Act and the National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act could be amended to ensure that domestic workers are not excluded and are entitled to at least the national minimum wage, in line with Article 11 of ILO Convention No. 189 on remuneration (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011; ILO, 2011). Second, institutional mechanisms already being developed under the National Social Protection Policy and NASSP provide a platform for inclusion. By designating domestic workers as a priority vulnerable group within NASSCO registries and CCT targeting, the government can extend cash transfers, health insurance, and livelihood support to this sector (Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2016; World Bank, 2020). Third, ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 would provide a binding framework for aligning national law and practice with international standards on decent work for domestic workers. Ratification would compel the progressive extension of labour rights, social security, and occupational safety and health to domestic workers (ILO, 2011). These opportunities are directly relevant to the work of guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. Legislative amendments and ratification of C189 would create a clear legal mandate for institutions to identify, refer, and support domestic workers. Integration into NASSP/NASSCO would also provide concrete pathways for accessing health, education, and cash transfer benefits, thereby addressing the access-related and institutional challenges documented in this study. Extending social insurance to informal workers is complex, but not impossible (ILO, 2016). Given the specific nature of domestic work, a combination of non-contributory and reduced-contribution schemes can be considered. For domestic workers with limited or no contributory capacity, non-contributory social assistance is critical. Examples include universal child grants and maternity benefits. A child grant can help women domestic workers meet childcare costs, while a maternity benefit can provide income during periods when they are unable to work (ILO, 2011; World Bank, 2020). These measures align with Article 14 of C189, which calls for the progressive extension of social security to domestic workers on a basis no less favourable than that applicable to workers generally. For domestic workers with some contributory capacity, governments can extend social insurance at reduced rates. Several countries have adopted this approach: Argentina, Cabo Verde, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Philippines, Spain and Uruguay all apply lower contribution rates for domestic workers than for other salaried workers (ILO, 2016). The State should also explore schemes that do not rely solely on worker contributions. In South Africa, for example, domestic workers are covered by the Unemployment Insurance Fund, into which employers are legally required to contribute (Department of Employment and Labour, South Africa, 2001). A similar employer-worker shared model could be adapted in Nigeria under the Employee Compensation Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010). Broader awareness-raising on domestic workers' rights and social protection is also needed. This includes the role of

unions in improving working conditions through lobbying and collective action. A range of actors can work with the State, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and trade unions such as the Federation of Informal Workers' Organization of Nigeria (FIWON), to conduct targeted awareness campaigns for domestic workers (FIWON, 2011). The recognition, promotion and protection of domestic workers' rights will also require employer education and a willingness among employers to comply with legal obligations. These pathways offer practical entry points for guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone. Non-contributory grants and reduced-rate insurance can address affordability barriers, while employer contributions and CSO-led awareness can create institutional channels for identification, referral, and support. Together, they provide a policy basis for reducing the access-related and institutional challenges documented in this study. Lessons can also be drawn from other African countries that are advancing social protection for domestic workers. In Zambia, for example, efforts are underway to extend coverage through existing partnerships. Public institutions responsible for social protection, relevant government ministries, and employers' and workers' organizations are collaborating to identify common policy options and raise awareness of social protection for domestic workers (ILO, 2016; Zambia Federation of Employers, 2018). There is notable interest from both employers and employees in Zambia in accessing social protection benefits, including pensions, work injury protection, and Social Health Insurance (SHI). Employers have indicated willingness to register their workers provided that contribution rates remain affordable and payment procedures are simplified. Both employers and employees have also expressed readiness to learn about legal requirements and administrative procedures for social protection (ILO, 2016). Globally, attention to decent work for domestic workers has increased following the adoption of ILO Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201 (ILO, 2011). Although C189 has not yet been ratified in Nigeria, the ongoing expansion of social protection through NASSP, NASSCO, and the National Social Protection Policy creates opportunities to include domestic workers (Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2016; World Bank, 2020). These developments provide a policy window to address existing discrimination and extend rights and social protection to domestic workers in line with international standards.

The Zambian experience suggests that partnership-based approaches can help overcome data, affordability, and administrative barriers in Nigeria. For guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone, such partnerships could create institutional pathways to identify domestic workers, facilitate registration, and link them to health, pension, and injury benefits. This would directly address the access-related and institutional challenges identified in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, appropriate for eliciting the perceptions of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on an existing phenomenon. The population of the study comprised all guidance counsellors and NGO personnel engaged in child and domestic worker welfare interventions within the study area. Given the relatively small and identifiable nature of this population, a census sampling technique was adopted, involving all 70 accessible respondents (45 guidance counsellors and 25 NGO personnel). The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Challenges in Supporting Domestic Workers Questionnaire (CSDWQ)," developed by the researcher and structured on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument was divided into two sections corresponding to the two research questions. It was validated by three experts in Guidance and Counselling and Social Work, whose observations were incorporated into the final version of the instrument. A trial-test was conducted on 15 respondents outside the study area to establish reliability, and Cronbach alpha analysis yielded a coefficient of 0.85, indicating that the instrument was reliable. Data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, with a criterion mean of 2.50 used as the benchmark for decision-making. The null hypothesis was tested using the independent samples t-test at the 0.05 level of significance. This study was conducted in Nnewi Education Zone of Anambra State, This study was conducted in Nnewi Education Zone, Anambra State, Nigeria. Nnewi Nnewi Education Zone is one of the six education zones in Anambra State, Nigeria, and comprises four Local Government Areas: Nnewi North, Nnewi South, Ekwusigo, and Idemili South. The administrative structure and major towns in each Local Government Area are presented as follows. Nnewi North has its headquarters in Nnewi and includes the major towns of Nnewichi, Uruagu, Otolu, and Umudim. Nnewi South has its headquarters in Ukpok and includes Ukpok, Amichi, Ekwulumili, Akwaihedi, Unubi, Azigbo, Osumenyi, and Ebenator. Ekwusigo has its headquarters in Oba and

includes Oba, Ichi, Oraifite, and Ozubulu. Idemili South has its headquarters in Ojoto and includes Ojoto, Alor, Awka-Etiti, Nnokwa, and Nnobi.

This education zone is a major commercial and industrial hub in South-Eastern Nigeria, with Nnewi town widely recognized as the industrial capital of the region. The concentration of trade, manufacturing, and small and medium scale enterprises has resulted in substantial rural-urban migration, thereby increasing the demand for domestic labour within households and business establishments. The socio-economic context of Nnewi education zone renders it suitable for examining issues relating to domestic work. A considerable number of households in the zone engage domestic workers, including adolescents and young adults, for household chores, childcare, and other forms of domestic support. While some of these arrangements provide opportunities for formal education and vocational skill acquisition, others occur within informal structures characterized by limited regulatory oversight and inadequate welfare safeguards. Furthermore, Nnewi education zone is served by a network of public and private secondary schools, as well as non-governmental organizations engaged in child protection, welfare, and community development. Guidance counsellors in these schools and practitioners in NGOs constitute the frontline professionals most likely to interface with domestic workers and to identify indicators of abuse, exploitation, and educational deprivation. Given the economic significance of the zone, the prevalence of domestic employment, and the presence of institutional actors involved in welfare and protection, Nnewi education zone provides an appropriate setting for investigating the challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in reaching and supporting domestic workers.

Summary of the findings

Based on data analysis from Tables 1-3, the following were the major findings of the study:

1. Access-related challenges: Guidance counsellors and NGOs face significant access-related challenges in reaching and supporting domestic workers. The grand mean score of 3.49 (SD = 0.70) indicates agreement. The most prominent challenges identified were: fear of victimization or dismissal if domestic workers engage with counsellors or NGOs ($\bar{x} = 3.54$), cultural attitudes that discourage disclosure of abuse or exploitation ($\bar{x} = 3.53$), difficulty in reaching domestic workers because they live in private households ($\bar{x} = 3.51$), and lack of awareness among domestic workers, especially children, that counselling support exists ($\bar{x} = 3.50$).
2. Institutional and systemic challenges: Guidance counsellors and NGOs also face significant institutional and systemic challenges in supporting domestic workers. With a grand mean of 3.44 (SD = 0.71), respondents agreed to all the items. The major challenges include: inadequate funding limiting the reach of intervention programmes ($\bar{x} = 3.51$), weak legal and regulatory frameworks limiting counsellors' authority to intervene ($\bar{x} = 3.46$), shortage of trained personnel to handle domestic worker welfare cases ($\bar{x} = 3.43$), inadequate specialised training for counsellors on child labour and domestic servitude ($\bar{x} = 3.41$), inadequate follow-up and monitoring of rescued or supported domestic workers ($\bar{x} = 3.41$), and poor coordination between guidance counsellors, NGOs, and government welfare agencies ($\bar{x} = 3.40$).
3. Difference in perception by professional group: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers. The t-test result showed $t_{\text{cal}} = 0.38$, which is less than $t_{\text{crit}} = 1.99$ at $df = 68$ and 0.05 level of significance. Hence, the null hypothesis was retained. This implies that both guidance counsellors and NGO personnel share similar views regarding the challenges. In conclusion, the study found that both access-related and institutional/systemic barriers substantially hinder guidance counsellors and NGOs in Nnewi Education Zone from effectively reaching and supporting domestic workers. The consensus between both groups suggests the need for systemic, policy-level interventions.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What access-related challenges do guidance counsellors and NGOs face in reaching and supporting domestic workers?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation scores on access-related challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in reaching and supporting domestic workers

S/N	Access-related challenges	Mean($\bar{x}$)	SD	Remark
1	Domestic workers are difficult to reach because they live within private households.	3.51	0.68	Agreed
2	Employers of domestic workers are often unwilling to grant access for counselling contact.	3.44	0.73	Agreed
3	Domestic workers fear victimisation or dismissal if they engage with counsellors or NGOs.	3.54	0.71	Agreed
4	There is no formal institutional structure linking domestic workers to counselling services.	3.43	0.70	Agreed
5	Domestic workers, especially child domestic workers, are unaware that counselling support exists.	3.50	0.69	Agreed
6	Cultural attitudes discourage domestic workers from disclosing abuse or exploitation.	3.53	0.68	Agreed
	Grand Mean	3.49	0.70	Agreed

Table 2 indicates that guidance counsellors and NGOs encounter several challenges in accessing domestic workers for counselling and support. The most prominent challenge was fear of victimisation or dismissal for engaging with counsellors or NGOs (Mean = 3.54, SD = 0.71), followed by cultural attitudes that discourage disclosure of abuse or exploitation (Mean = 3.53, SD = 0.68). Respondents also agreed that domestic workers are difficult to reach because they live in private households (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.68) and that many, particularly child domestic workers, are unaware of available counselling services (Mean = 3.50, SD = 0.69). With a grand mean of 3.49 (SD = 0.70), the findings show that access-related barriers are substantial and may limit the ability of counsellors and NGOs to effectively reach and support domestic workers.

Research Question 2: What institutional and systemic challenges do guidance counsellors and NGOs face in supporting domestic workers?

Table 3: Institutional and systemic challenges faced by guidance counsellors and NGOs in supporting domestic workers

S/N	Institutional and Systemic Challenges	Mean($\bar{x}$)	SD	Remark
1	Inadequate funding limits the reach of counselling and NGO intervention programmes.	3.51	0.68	Agreed
2	There is a shortage of trained personnel to handle domestic worker welfare cases.	3.43	0.71	Agreed
3	Weak legal and regulatory frameworks limit counsellors' authority to intervene in domestic worker cases.	3.46	0.70	Agreed
4	Coordination between guidance counsellors, NGOs, and government welfare agencies is poor.	3.40	0.72	Agreed
5	Counsellors' lack specialised training in handling child labour and domestic servitude cases.	3.41	0.75	Agreed

6	Follow-up and monitoring of rescued or supported domestic workers is largely inadequate.	3.41	0.71	Agreed
	Grand Mean	3.44	0.71	Agreed

Table 3 shows that guidance counsellors and NGOs face several institutional and systemic challenges in supporting domestic workers. Inadequate funding was identified as the most prominent challenge (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.68), followed by weak legal and regulatory frameworks limiting counsellors' authority to intervene (Mean = 3.46, SD = 0.70). Respondents also agreed that there is a shortage of trained personnel (Mean = 3.43, SD = 0.71), while specialised training, follow-up, and monitoring remain inadequate (Mean = 3.41 each). The grand mean of 3.44 (SD = 0.71) indicates overall agreement that institutional and systemic challenges hinder the effective support of domestic workers by guidance counsellors and NGOs.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers.

Table 4: Significant difference in the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Guidance Counsellors	45	3.45	0.70	68	0.38	1.99	Not Sig.
NGO Personnel	25	3.49	0.72				

Table 4 shows that guidance counsellors had a mean rating of 3.45 (SD = 0.70), while NGO personnel had a slightly higher mean rating of 3.49 (SD = 0.72) on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers. However, the calculated t-value of 0.38 was less than the critical t-value of 1.99 at 68 degrees of freedom and 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained, indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel regarding the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings in Table 2 show that guidance counsellors and NGOs encounter substantial access-related challenges in reaching and supporting domestic workers, with a grand mean of 3.49 (SD = 0.70). The most pressing challenge was fear of victimisation or dismissal if domestic workers engage with counsellors or NGOs (Mean = 3.54, SD = 0.71). This aligns with ILO (2016) observations that isolation and job insecurity in private households make domestic workers reluctant to seek external support. Closely related is cultural attitudes that discourage disclosure of abuse or exploitation (Mean = 3.53, SD = 0.68). In the Nigerian context, domestic work is often stigmatized and normalized as help rather than employment, which silences workers and discourages reporting (Oloko, 2006; ILO, 2016). Other major barriers include the fact that domestic workers are difficult to reach because they live within private households (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.68) and that child domestic workers are largely unaware that counselling support exists (Mean = 3.50, SD = 0.69). The invisibility of domestic work within private homes has been identified in literature as a key factor limiting service delivery and state regulation (ILO, 2011). The absence of formal institutional structures linking domestic workers to counselling services (Mean = 3.43, SD = 0.70) and employers' unwillingness to grant access (Mean = 3.44, SD = 0.73) further compound the problem. Taken together, these results suggest that access is constrained not only by physical location, but also by power relations, fear, and lack of awareness. This reflects the Social Exclusion Theory, which argues that marginalized groups are cut off from institutions and services due to structural and social barriers (Levitas et al., 2007). These high mean scores can be directly explained through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Social Exclusion Theory. Microsystem isolation as a driver: The highest-rated barriers reflect classic microsystem dysfunction. In Bronfenbrenner's model, the microsystem is the immediate environment of direct interaction. For domestic workers, this microsystem is a closed household, unlike a school

or open workplace. This closure creates physical and social isolation where the employer controls communication, movement, and access to information. This explains both the unawareness of support and the pronounced fear of dismissal. The power imbalance is contained within this single microsystem, with no competing microsystem such as peers or extended family to buffer it. As ILO (2016) observes, isolation and job insecurity make domestic workers reluctant to seek external support, while ILO (2011) notes the invisibility of work within private homes as a key limit to service delivery. Exosystem and macrosystem failures and Social Exclusion: The remaining barriers reflect breakdowns at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, which Social Exclusion Theory (Levitas et al., 2007) frames as structural exclusion. At the exosystem level, institutions that should indirectly protect the child — Ministry of Women Affairs, NAPTIP, NGO referral pathways, and school-home linkage policies — are understaffed, underfunded, and poorly coordinated. There is no formal policy mandating that households employing minors be linked to counselling services. Without this institutional bridge, counsellors have no legitimate entry point, allowing employers to refuse access with impunity. The child experiences this as total institutional invisibility. At the macrosystem level, cultural normalization of domestic work as "help" or "training" rather than employment (Oloko, 2006; ILO, 2016) legitimizes the closure of the microsystem. When the household is not defined as a workplace, abuse is treated as a family matter rather than a labour violation. This norm drives the high score on non-disclosure and reinforces fear, as reporting is perceived as disloyalty. Taken together, access is constrained not only by physical location but by power relations, fear, and lack of awareness. Domestic workers are structurally excluded: cut off from information through mesosystem breakdown between home and school, from protection through exosystem policy and referral failure, and from legitimacy through macrosystem cultural devaluation. The high means therefore do not reflect individual reluctance, but a multi-layered ecological enclosure where microsystem isolation is sustained by exosystem failure and macrosystem normalization. Table 3 reveals that institutional and systemic challenges are also significant, with a grand mean of 3.44 (SD = 0.71). Inadequate funding ranked highest (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.68). Without sustainable funding, NGOs and school counselling units cannot run outreach, rescue, or rehabilitation programmes for domestic workers. This is consistent with World Bank (2020) reports on limited financing for social protection and welfare services in Nigeria. The second major challenge is weak legal and regulatory frameworks limiting counsellors' authority to intervene (Mean = 3.46, SD = 0.70). As discussed earlier, the Labour Act (1990) and National Minimum Wage Act (2011) largely exclude domestic workers in private households, leaving counsellors with no legal mandate to act. Other agreed challenges include: shortage of trained personnel (Mean = 3.43, SD = 0.71); lack of specialised training in child labour and domestic servitude cases (Mean = 3.41, SD = 0.75); inadequate follow-up and monitoring of rescued workers (Mean = 3.41, SD = 0.71); and poor coordination between counsellors, NGOs, and government welfare agencies (Mean = 3.40, SD = 0.72). These findings mirror ILO (2016) and FIWON (2011) reports that collective organising and state-NGO partnerships for domestic workers in Nigeria remain at an early stage. Without legal backing, trained staff, and inter-agency coordination, interventions remain ad hoc and unsustainable. Table 4 tested whether there is a significant difference in perceptions between the two groups. Guidance counsellors had a mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.70) while NGO personnel had 3.49 (SD = 0.72). The calculated t-value of 0.38 was less than the critical t-value of 1.99 at $df = 68$, $p < 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel on the challenges faced in supporting domestic workers. This suggests consensus across both professional groups. Both counsellors in schools and NGO workers experience similar structural barriers, which implies that solutions must target the system rather than individual capacity alone. Overall, the findings show that access-related challenges are rooted in the invisibility of domestic work and power imbalances in private homes, while institutional challenges stem from weak laws, poor funding, and lack of coordination. Addressing these will require legal reform, inclusion of domestic workers in social protection programmes like NASSP (World Bank, 2020), capacity building for counsellors, and stronger partnerships between schools, NGOs, government agencies, and employer/worker organisations as demonstrated in Zambia (ILO, 2016). The findings revealed that access-related challenges, particularly the fear of victimization or dismissal among domestic workers, cultural attitudes that discourage disclosure, and the private nature of domestic employment, constitute major barriers to effective counselling and NGO intervention. Domestic workers may be reluctant to seek assistance because of concerns about losing their employment or facing negative consequences from employers. The fact that many domestic workers live within private households also makes it difficult for counsellors and NGOs to identify, reach and provide continuous support to those who may be experiencing abuse or exploitation. This finding aligns with Ibeh (2021), who similarly found that fear of employer retaliation significantly discouraged domestic workers from disclosing abuse to

external parties. The finding also corroborates Okoye and Adeyemi (2022), who reported that the private and largely unregulated nature of domestic employment created substantial obstacles to external welfare intervention. The limited awareness of counselling services among domestic workers, particularly child domestic workers, further suggests that outreach and awareness programmes are necessary to improve access to available support services. The findings on institutional and systemic challenges revealed that inadequate funding, weak legal and regulatory frameworks, shortage of trained personnel, poor inter-agency coordination, limited specialised training and inadequate follow-up constitute important barriers to effective support for domestic workers. These challenges may limit the capacity of counsellors and NGOs to respond adequately to cases of abuse, exploitation and domestic servitude. In particular, inadequate funding can restrict outreach activities, personnel development and sustained intervention, while poor coordination among counsellors, NGOs and government welfare agencies can result in fragmented service delivery. This finding supports Umeh and Bassey (2023), whose study of NGO intervention programmes similarly identified funding constraints and poor coordination as significant barriers to sustainable domestic worker support. The finding is also consistent with the ecological systems perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains that the welfare of individuals is influenced not only by immediate interpersonal relationships but also by wider institutional and social structures. Thus, the challenges faced by domestic workers and those attempting to support them extend beyond individual professional practice and are influenced by household conditions, institutional arrangements and broader regulatory systems. The similarity in the perceptions of guidance counsellors and NGO personnel further suggests that these challenges are shared across professional groups rather than being peculiar to a particular category of service provider. Both groups operate within the same social and institutional environment and are therefore likely to encounter similar difficulties in gaining access to domestic workers, securing cooperation from employers, obtaining adequate resources and coordinating support services. This shared perception reinforces the view that addressing the challenges requires collective and coordinated action rather than isolated efforts by individual counsellors or NGOs. Strengthening inter-agency collaboration, improving funding, providing specialised training, increasing awareness among domestic workers and establishing accessible and confidential referral mechanisms would therefore enhance the capacity of service providers to reach and support domestic workers effectively.

CONCLUSION

Nnewi education zone constitutes a pertinent context for this study. As one of the six education zones in Anambra State, it comprises four Local Government Areas — Nnewi North, Nnewi South, Ekwusigo, and Idemili South characterized by a high concentration of commercial, industrial, and educational activities. The prevalence of households that engage domestic workers, together with the existence of an established network of secondary schools and non-governmental organizations involved in child protection and welfare, renders the zone suitable for examining the challenges encountered by guidance counsellors and NGO practitioners in reaching and supporting domestic workers. Consequently, empirical evidence from this zone can provide valuable insights for policy and practice aimed at enhancing the protection, education, and welfare of domestic workers in comparable socio-economic contexts in South-Eastern Nigeria. The study further concludes that guidance counsellors and NGOs face considerable access-related and institutional challenges in supporting domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone. These challenges are attributable to the private and informal nature of domestic employment and are exacerbated by weak legal and institutional frameworks. As a result, the reach and effectiveness of existing intervention efforts are significantly constrained.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Guidance counsellors in secondary schools in Nnewi education zone should not wait for a state-wide referral policy but develop a low threshold, one-page, school-specific referral protocol. This should involve identifying specific desk officers rather than offices at NAPTIP Anambra Command, Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare, and the Anambra State Ministry of Education Guidance and Counselling Division, including direct names, phone numbers, and working hours to reduce bureaucratic delays. Referrals should be tiered into Level 1 (school-based counselling and safety planning), Level 2 (Ministry of Women Affairs for family mediation and welfare), and Level 3 (NAPTIP on 0800-225-2822

and Police Gender Unit via 112 for cases of trafficking, sexual abuse, confinement, and starvation). The referral map should be laminated and displayed in the counselling office, staff room, and principal's office to ensure continuity.

2. Given legislative gaps that prevent forced entry into private households, counsellors should strengthen the mesosystem link they control, the school. This includes providing a locked confidential disclosure box in the counselling office, integrating three neutral screening questions into routine counselling intake forms for all JSS students (living arrangement, access to phone, rest and sleep pattern) to normalize identification, and scheduling counselling clinic hours during break periods when domestic workers have relative freedom.
3. To address weak coordination between agencies, relational approaches should be adopted. Schools should organize quarterly linkage meetings by inviting NAPTIP officers and social workers from the Ministry of Women Affairs per term for brief sensitization on rights, thereby building familiarity for case referrals. Counsellors should partner with local NGOs such as SSDO and community-based child protection committees for home visits and case follow-up, while providing school-based documentation needed for NGO case files. A simple shared case register indicating date, initials, action taken, and referral officer contacted should be maintained and de-identified summaries shared monthly among counsellor clusters.
4. Where legislation is silent on domestic work as employment, factual documentation should be used to create leverage. Counsellors should record observable facts (e.g., denied rest, bruises on forearm, works 5am-11pm) rather than labels. Referrals should be framed using language aligned with existing enforceable laws, including the Child Rights Law of Anambra State (2004), the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law, and the NAPTIP Act, which cover child labour, physical violence, and sexual exploitation. Community gatekeepers including PTA executives, town union women leaders, and landlords should be briefed on red flags such as isolation, fear, and non-attendance to facilitate informal access where formal law is limited.
5. Government should strengthen and enforce legal frameworks protecting domestic workers, including mandatory registration of domestic employment arrangements.
6. The government, through the Anambra State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Education, should develop and enforce clear policies and guidelines regulating domestic employment. Such policies should define minimum standards for the protection, education, and welfare of domestic workers, with mechanisms for monitoring compliance at household and community levels.
7. Regular training and retraining programmes should be organized for guidance counsellors and NGO practitioners on child rights, child protection, trauma-informed counselling, and ethical engagement with domestic workers. This will equip them with the requisite skills to identify at-risk domestic workers and provide appropriate interventions.
8. Advocacy campaigns should be conducted to raise awareness among parents, employers, and community members on the rights of domestic workers and the importance of ensuring access to education and safe working conditions. Media channels, religious gatherings, and community meetings should be utilized to promote attitudinal change toward domestic work.

Implications of the findings

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, practice, and the role of guidance counsellors and NGOs in supporting domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone.

1. First, the significant access-related challenges identified imply that without deliberate outreach strategies, domestic workers will remain invisible and excluded from counselling and support services. The high rating of fear of victimization, cultural silence, and residence in private households suggests that traditional school-based or office-based counselling models will not work. There is a need for

community-based, confidential, and employer-engaged approaches, including partnerships with CSOs like FIWON and faith-based groups, to safely reach domestic workers (ILO, 2016; FIWON, 2011).

2. The institutional and systemic challenges imply that current structures are inadequate to protect and support domestic workers. Inadequate funding and weak legal frameworks mean that even when cases are identified, counsellors and NGOs lack the resources and legal authority to intervene effectively. This underscores the urgency of domesticating ILO C189 and amending the Labour Act (1990) and Minimum Wage Act (2011) to explicitly include domestic workers. It also highlights the need for government to integrate domestic workers into existing social protection programmes such as NASSP and NHIA, and to provide dedicated budget lines for their welfare (World Bank, 2020; Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2016).
3. The shortage of trained personnel and lack of specialised training on child labour and domestic servitude imply that counsellors are currently ill-equipped to handle the psychosocial and legal complexities of these cases. This calls for targeted capacity building and curriculum development for guidance counsellors, as well as improved referral pathways between schools, NGOs, NAPTIP, and the Ministry of Women Affairs.
4. The finding of no significant difference between guidance counsellors and NGO personnel implies consensus on the problem. This presents an opportunity for collaboration. Joint advocacy, data sharing, and coordinated interventions can be more effective than isolated efforts. The Zambian model of multi-stakeholder partnerships offers a useful example (ILO, 2016). In summary, the findings imply that addressing the plight of domestic workers in Nnewi Education Zone requires moving beyond individual charity to systemic reform. It demands legal recognition, institutional support, funding, training, and multi-sector collaboration to ensure that guidance counsellors and NGOs can effectively identify, protect, and empower domestic workers.

Limitations of the study

This study is not without limitations, and these should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study is limited to selected NGOs and guidance counsellors in Anambra State. Due to time and resource constraints, a small and purposive sample was used. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to all NGOs, guidance counsellors, or domestic workers in other states in Nigeria. Variations in NGO capacity, government support, and cultural practices across states mean that challenges in Anambra State may differ from those in other regions. Second, a major limitation is that the study did not involve direct contact with domestic workers themselves. Data were collected only from guidance counsellors and NGO personnel who work with or on behalf of domestic workers. While these professionals provide valuable insights based on their experience, their perspectives are indirect and may not fully capture the lived experiences, needs, and voices of domestic workers. Therefore, some aspects of exploitation, coping strategies, and help-seeking behavior from the workers' own viewpoint may not be adequately represented. Third, the study relies on questionnaires and interviews with counsellors and NGO staff, so the findings are based on perceptions and recollections. These may be influenced by social desirability bias, recall bias, or professional interpretation. Without direct input from domestic workers, there is a possibility of under-reporting or misrepresentation of certain challenges. Fourth, domestic work takes place in private homes and is largely informal. This made it practically and ethically difficult to access domestic workers directly for this study. In addition, NGOs and counsellors may be constrained by confidentiality agreements and safety concerns, which could limit the details they are willing to share about specific cases. Finally, the absence of full domestication and enforcement of ILO Convention 189 in Nigeria limits the ability to assess compliance. The study therefore depends on existing laws, policy documents, and participants' understanding of how these apply to domestic workers, which may not reflect actual practice. Despite these limitations, the study provides important preliminary insights into the operational challenges faced by NGOs and guidance counsellors in assisting domestic workers. The findings can serve as a basis for future research that includes direct participation of domestic workers and a larger sample across multiple states.

Suggestions for further study

Based on the limitations and findings of this study, the following areas are suggested for future research:

1. Future studies should seek to involve domestic workers themselves as primary respondents. Direct engagement with adult and child domestic workers will provide first-hand accounts of their experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and expectations of support. This will help to capture their voices and ensure that interventions are truly needs-based.
2. This study was limited to Anambra State. Further research should be conducted across multiple states in Nigeria, especially in states with high prevalence of domestic work, to allow for comparative analysis. A national study would provide a broader understanding of regional differences in NGO and guidance counsellor practices and in the implementation of C189.
3. Subsequent studies should adopt a larger sample size and combine quantitative and qualitative methods. This will enhance the generalizability of findings and allow for deeper exploration of issues such as abuse, mental health, and access to social protection among domestic workers.
4. 4. Future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing NGO programs and guidance counselling interventions for domestic workers. Impact assessment studies would help to identify best practices and gaps in service delivery and inform policy and program design.
5. Given the partial domestication of ILO Convention 189 in Nigeria, further research is needed to examine the extent to which relevant laws and policies are being implemented and enforced. Studies should explore the roles of government agencies, labour inspectors, and the judiciary in protecting domestic workers' rights.
6. There is a need for targeted studies on migrant domestic workers in Nigeria. Research should examine the specific vulnerabilities they face, the challenges NGOs encounter in assisting them, and how migration policies intersect with labour protection. By addressing these areas, future research can build on the present study and contribute more comprehensively to policy, practice, and advocacy for the protection of domestic workers in Nigeria

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